11-2019

Jesus, God's Story and Storyteller

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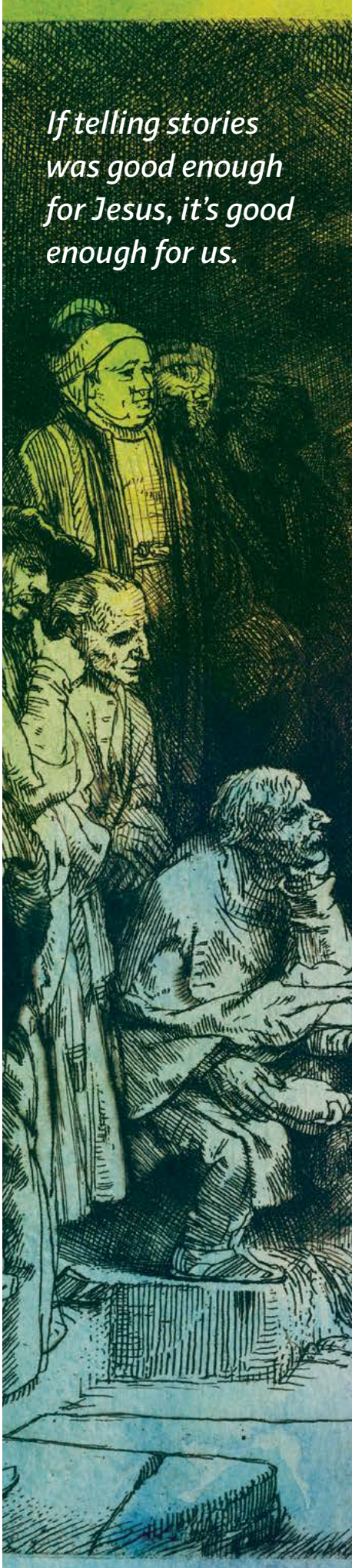

Baptist preacher Carlyle Marney is credited with saying: "Preachers learn to preach in Greek when we ought to learn to preach in Hebrew."[1] For Marney, the primary distinction between the two forms of preaching is that Greek uses the language currency of words, while Hebrew uses a currency of stories and rich imagery.

A homiletic for postmodernity

Marney clearly understood that what has worked well for one generation may not work for the next. This is certainly true about the emerging postmodern generation.

Postmodern people are driven by story and images. They perceive truth through an experience with truth.

Millennials and Gen Zers live in a culture that "talks in story." They breathe, move, and have their being in a world where "social media has replaced print media as the dominant communication choice."[2] They exist in a culture that values participation over listening. Millennials and Gen Zers do not want to just be told about God; they want to experience God for themselves.[3]

Christ and His parables

John 1:18 declares: "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has *made him known*" (NIV; emphasis added). The Greek word εξηγεομαι, here translated "made him known," literally means "to draw out in narrative." God chose to give the fullest revelation of Himself, not in a word but in a story. Jesus became the living story of who God is. God's primary source of self-revelation is story. God chooses to reveal Himself not as propositional truth but, rather, as experiential truth. This is why Eugene Peterson argues that "story is the gospel way."[4] Jesus was not only God's story but also used this primary method of divine revelation in His preaching via parables.

Jeffrey Arthurs asserts, "When we come to the parables, we come to the heart of Jesus' ministry. . . . We come to the heart of

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SCAN FOR AUDIO

"Our brains experience stories as if they were part of real life and as if they were happening to us." —HEATHER DAY

Jesus himself."[5] The parables of Jesus encompass a large portion of His preaching.[6] The Greek term for parable, παραβολε, appears fifty times in the New Testament; all but two are in the synoptic gospels (the other two are in Hebrews).[7] Depending upon how you interpret παραβολε, Jesus told 50 to 70 parables in the synoptic gospels.[8] Ralph and Gregg Lewis estimate that 43 percent of Jesus' words in Matthew, 16 percent in Mark, and 52 percent in Luke were parables.[9]

What, exactly, is a parable?

Beginning in the early- to mid-second century, most interpreters under the influence of Greco-Roman forms of interpretation viewed parables as elaborate allegories.[10] The allegorical view that dominated parabolic interpretation for sixteen centuries would begin a dramatic shift throughout the twentieth century. C. H. Dodd was the first Biblical Scholar to identify the metaphorical nature of Jesus's parables. He offered this definition of a parable: "At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought."[11]

Dan O. Via first saw the parables of Jesus as more than metaphors; he viewed them as metaphorical narratives. Thus, he applied the literary device of narrative analysis to the study of parables, analyzing "plot, theme, character development, and mood, and the like."[12]

As metaphors, parables take two discreet and not entirely comparable objects "drawn from nature or common life" and put them into relationship with each other. The metaphorical nature of parables gives them the ability to "surprise and shock."[13]

Narraphors

Therefore, Jesus' parables are metaphorical narratives, or "narraphors,"[14] which constituted Jesus' primary homiletical method. Thus, Marney's call for preachers to learn to preach in Hebrew for the emergent generations is a call to learn to preach in narraphor.

Why was narraphor Jesus' primary homiletical method? The answer to this question is the key to unlocking what the text intends to do.[15] Author Ellen White states, "Through the imagination He [Jesus] reached the heart. His illustrations were taken from the things of daily life, and although they were simple, they had in them a wonderful depth of meaning."[16] The implication is that Jesus understood the rhetorical function of narrative and metaphor.

Because parables are metaphorical narratives, they have a two-pronged rhetorical function: both metaphor and narrative. Their function is not an either/or but a both/and.

Robert McAfee Brown recognizes that stories have the power to evoke change in the hearer or reader. He argues that "stories can change us, turn us about, be instruments in a process that is called 'conversion.' "[17] What does narrative do in or to the reader or hearer that evokes change? The fields of neuroscience and literary analysis offer complementary answers for the deep impact of narratives.

Hardwired

From a neuroscience perspective, Heather Thompson Day suggests that the reason stories have a deep impact is that the human brain is "hardwired to respond to stories."[18] She supports her claim by exploring the results of a brain imaging study. The study identified the regions of the brain activated when an individual is processing the five "traditional" senses (sight, sound, taste, smell, touch). The research discovered that these same areas of the brain are activated when a person is engrossed in a story.[19] Thus, Day claims, "Our brains experience stories as if they were part of real life and as if they were happening to us."[20]

The emotional impact

Along these same lines, Jerome T. Walsh, from the viewpoint of literary analysis, contends that narratives "are not limited to—or even primarily concerned with—the transmission of information."[21] According to Walsh, a narrative appeals to more than just the intellect and makes its deepest impact at the level of emotion and the will.[22] The emotional impact of the narrative comes from its ability to draw the reader or hearer into the story.

Another rhetorical function of narratives is at the level of what Walsh refers to as "the will." A narrative compels us to make decisions as it unfolds. "We are moved to accept or reject the values we perceive at work in the stories and to make moral judgments about characters and their deeds."[23] These responses allow us to make sense of the story as it unfolds and ultimately determine whether or not we embrace the claims about life that the story makes.

The concept that a parabolic narraphor loses its impact if the sermon is not delivered in a narrative form may be daunting for some preachers. As Eugene Lowry states, "Many homilists . . . believe they are not the 'storytelling kind' and thus are afraid to attempt this type of preaching. The assumption is that a few preachers have the 'gift' of storytelling; the rest of us do not. I believe this *not* to be the case. . . . More likely it means that we have not isolated the variables of learnable skills in order to become good storytellers."[24]

John Walsh concurs that storytelling is a learnable art and has published a training book for storytellers that isolates the variables of learnable skills necessary for good storytellers.[25]

Conclusion

Preachers serious about connecting with the younger generations must learn how to follow Jesus' example of story- and image-rich preaching. Preachers must also get past their fear of narrative-rich preaching and their belief that they are not the "storytelling type." Storytelling is learnable. Our brains are wired to respond to and crave stories; thus, the ability to tell stories is innate within all of us.

There are three best practices to develop and refine your storytelling abilities. First, read books and/or attend seminars that focus on the art of storytelling. Second, read well-written narratives and listen to the stories of good storytellers. Third, begin telling stories to various practice audiences.

The preachers of the twenty-first century who make the deepest impact will be preachers committed to the homiletical example of Jesus. Like Jesus, they will be God's story and become God's storyteller. They will utilize the art of storytelling to make God's truth come alive by capturing the imagination of people in such a way that they have a dynamic experience with Him who is "the Truth."

1 Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola, "Rethinking the Preaching and Teaching Ministry of Jesus," pastors.com, October 11, 2012, https://pastors.com/preaching-teaching-jesus/.

2 Leonard Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 25.

3 Sweet, *Giving Blood*, 27, 46, 50, 53, 90, 199.

4 Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over a Wall* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1997), 4.

5 Jeffery D. Arthurs, *Preaching With Variety: How to Re-create the Dynamics of Biblical Genres* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2007), 103.

6 David Buttrick, *Speaking Parables: A Homiletic Guide* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000), xiii.

7 Arthurs, *Preaching With Variety*, 103.

8 Arthurs, *Preaching With Variety*, 103.

9 Ralph L. Lewis and Gregg Lewis, *Learning to Preach Like Jesus* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1989), 86.

10 Craig L. Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables: From Responsible Interpretation to Powerful Proclamation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 34.

11 C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London, UK: Fontana Books, 1961), 16.

12 Craig L. Blomberg, "New Horizons in Parable Research," *Trinity Journal* 3, no. 1 (1982): 4.

13 Blomberg, "New Horizons in Parable Research," 4.

14 Sweet, *Giving Blood*, 28.

15 Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1989), 26.

16 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1898), 254.

17 Robert McAfee Brown, "My Story and the Story," *Theology Today* 32 (1975): 172.

18 Heather Day, "Use of Stories in Courses and Student Engagement at Southwestern Michigan College" (PhD diss., Andrews University, 2018), 33, https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2933&context=dissertations.

19 Day, "Use of Stories," 33, 34. Also see Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1997).

20 Day, "Use of Stories," 34.

21 Jerome T. Walsh, *Old Testament Narrative: A Guide to Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), xii.

22 Jerome T. Walsh, *Old Testament Narrative*, xii.

23 Jerome T. Walsh, *Old Testament Narrative*, xii.

24 Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1980), 89.

25 John Walsh, *The Art of Storytelling: Easy Steps to Presenting an Unforgettable Story* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2003).